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Opinion – Trump's Effective China Strategy

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ARIEL SHANGGUAN, DEC 23 2019

One of the most common lines of thinking iterated by American politicians and academics in the last thirty years regarding the U.S. foreign policy towards China is this idea that, as long as the United States keeps helping China modernize and prosper economically, China will eventually come to face the constraints of its own political system and have no choice but to liberalize. In March 2000, a couple of months before China's official entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), then American President Bill Clinton delivered a speech on his rationale in incorporating China into the global trade system. He said, "[W]e can work to pull China in the *right direction*, or we can turn our backs and almost certainly push it in the wrong direction...The WTO agreement will move China in the *right direction*. It will advance the goals America has worked for in China for the past three decades...Membership in the WTO, of course, will not create a free society in China overnight or guarantee that China will play by global rules. But over time, I believe it will move China faster and further in the *right direction*, and certainly will do that more than rejection would. [my emphasis]" Throughout his speech, Bill Clinton repeatedly stated that accepting China into the WTO was a step to pull China in the "right direction", and that such a move would force China to "open up" not only economically, but also, eventually, politically i.e. becoming a "free society". A good political orator as he is, Clinton's speech at that time seems to have convinced most of the world about the positive impact of opening the Chinese markets for global competition.

Fast forward in 2019, one of the defining features of the current Trump presidency is his so-called "tough measures" on China. From his constant battles over tariffs to the public accusation of China's theft of intellectual properties, it was crystal clear from the very beginning that this president of the United States was more than willing to engage in an economic and political combat with its biggest geopolitical rivalry—even at the price of tanking the world economy. Trump's China talk as his signature rhetoric also gave rise to a growing bipartisan review of the state of U.S.-China trade relations. Over the last three years, there has been a drastic increase in the number of media articles debating whether letting China join the WTO was a mistake; while some of these writings managed to present a nuanced view, arguing that the economic challenges posed by China today were caused mostly by the failure to create effective multilateral global trade rules rather than the decision to let China join the WTO, others went as far as to claim that the normalization of the U.S-China trade relations itself was a big mistake.

Yet, despite the differences in their perspectives regarding China's entry into the global trade network, there was one common sentiment that was expressed by almost every one of those writers—and that is this idea that the West, or more specifically, the United States, is now "surer" that China is not going to liberalize. Such a view was probably most explicitly articulated in this recent article by David Rennie; but if one re-reads every piece on U.S.-China relations that has been published over the last few years, it is not difficult to identify that this sentiment is widely shared across the American political spectrum: the article by Reihan Salam in *The Atlantic* scolds that the U.S. was a "fool" to believe that China was ever going to be a friend, while this piece by Bod Davis from *The Wall Street Journal* says the U.S. was being too "hopeful" to have assumed that China would simply follow the paths of South Korea and Taiwan. The most poignant account on the American disappointment at the last forty years of China's reform probably comes from Susan Shirk, chair of the 21st century China Centre at the University of California San Diego, when she, in her recent interview with *Financial Times*, was quoted saying that some people she knew had "given upon on China", and that "there's no hope of getting them [China] to adjust their behavior to our [American] interests and values." It is as if almost 20 years after Clinton's optimistic speech about China's potential "opening up", American policymakers and academics had finally woken up to the reality where their masterplan to "change China"

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had not only failed, but also backfired—spectacularly.

But the more intriguing question here is this: what made them think that China could change, or *be changed*, in the first place? The fact is that, if one takes a close look at the history of encounters between the U.S. and China, this was not the first time an American, or Western in general, attempt to “change China” had failed. It is known that the initial encounter between China and the Western world began with the European missionaries’ attempts to spread Christianity in the Far East. When the Jesuits arrived in China in the late sixteenth century, their sole mission was to convert the Chinese society into a Christian nation. Yet it did not take long for them to realize that, unlike the relative success of the Catholic Church in Latin America, the conversion of the Chinese society was not as easy as they anticipated. Matteo Ricci, the founder of the Jesuit China Mission, then observed that, despite the deep-seated skepticism of the Chinese populace towards the Christian worldview, there was a relatively high level of acceptance of European scientific knowledge, especially amongst the members of the ruling class. Ricci accordingly came to a conclusion that, as long as the Jesuit missionaries keep teaching the Chinese elite European scientific knowledge, they would eventually begin to accept the European faith, too. As he said himself,

“In this kingdom [China] ... sciences and opinions founded on reason are greatly prized ... And consequently, it seems that it will be easy to persuade the principal men of the kingdom of the things of our holy faith, confirmed with so much evidence of reason, and when the most learned men agree with us, it will be easy to convert the rest.”[1]

The Jesuit tactic of “conversion through education” eventually became the model to be followed by most of the missionaries in China who would like to propagate Christianity, including the American missionaries who went to China in the nineteenth century. Of these Americans one of the most tenacious was William Alexander Parsons Martin. Martin was one of those Western advisers who were “propelled onward by the dream of making China over into their own image”. Because for missionaries like Martin, just like with the Jesuits who arrived in China before him, the idea of modernization and scientific progress was inextricably linked to Christian conversion; the process of modernization equals the process of Westernization which implies an eventual Christian conversion.

Hence, in the late nineteenth century, when Martin was asked to translate Henry Wheaton’s *Elements of International Law* into Chinese (the book which later became the primary text for the Qing officials to conduct diplomacy), he was more than happy to take some of his time from his missionary work in order to undertake the translation task. Because he firmly believed that, knowledge about international law, just like all the other Western scientific knowledge that the Jesuit missionaries brought into China before, was instrumental to, in his own words, “bring this [Chinese] atheistic government to the recognition of God and His Eternal Justice”.[2]

Juxtaposing Martin’s relentless efforts to convert China into Christianity with the more recent American attempt to liberalize China, it is not difficult to identify the similar line of thinking between the two accounts: while missionaries like Martin believed that teaching China Western knowledge could eventually lead to its Christian conversion, contemporary politicians such as Bill Clinton assumed that the benefits of market economy would eventually make China recognize the value of liberal democracy. What is ironic is that, in his speech, Clinton actually said letting China join the WTO was a different approach to “missionaries seeking new converts”—without realizing that his rhetoric on the benefits of globalization and market economy demonstrated the exact same logic as that of Western knowledge deployed by missionaries in the past. However, the reality is that, almost two centuries later, China did not just *not* become a Christian country, but, if anything, is increasing its crackdown on all kinds of religious activities. So why would liberal democracy be any different?

Whether history repeats itself is being constantly debated but never really answered. But even if history does not repeat itself, we could still identify some recurring patterns and draw meaningful lessons from them. Despite many of his questionable qualities, if there is one thing that separates Trump from the previous American presidents, it is that, Trump does *not attempt to change China*. Unlike Clinton who wanted to “pull China into the right direction”, Trump sees China as what it is and deals with it without hoping to turn it into something that it is not going to become. Because, if anything, the history of Christian conversion in China shows that any attempt to change China is probably not going to succeed. And so far, Trump’s policy is working—the trade war is very much hurting the Chinese economy in spite of the idyllic picture the state media is trying to portray. Trump may not be so much of a “stable

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genius” as he himself claims to be; but when it comes to China, he might well have the most effective foreign policy of all the U.S. presidents of the last thirty years.

Notes

[1] Mary Laven, *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011): 214.

[2] Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations, The Diplomatic Phase, 1858-1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960): 126.

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